

Miketz December 28 2024. [Genesis 41:1–44:17](#)

The last chapter ended with Joseph still imprisoned ([Genesis 39:20](#)) despite successfully interpreting dreams for his fellow prisoners. With this **Parshah "Miketz," which means "at the end," and refers to the end of two additional years of Joseph's imprisonment,** Pharaoh dreams of seven fat cows that are swallowed up by seven lean cows, and of seven fat ears of grain swallowed by seven lean ears. Joseph interprets the dreams to mean that seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of hunger, and advises Pharaoh to store grain during the plentiful years in order to keep his people alive. Joseph is probably the most famous interpreter of dreams in history, and both the agricultural and economic practices that he recommends – use the good times to save for the bad ones – makes as much sense now as it ever did.

Long before Sigmund Freud, dreams played an important role in Jewish tradition. In the Bible, dreams are portrayed as a means of communicating messages from God and as a source of truth about the present and the future. The Talmud imagines that dreaming can tap into the powers of prophecy, while the kabbalists understood dreams as journeys of the soul that may summon messengers or ward off frightening night time visions. Taken together, these various traditions portray not only dreaming, but sleep itself as a sacred activity.

Dreams play a central role in some other major narratives of the Bible. Jacob dreams of a ladder to heaven with angels climbing up and down. On another

occasion, Joseph dreams of a sheaf of wheat, with twelve other sheaves of wheat bowing down to it. In the Book of Kings, God comes to King Solomon in a dream to grant the gift of wisdom. Some biblical dreamers, like the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar are warned of disaster, while others, like Pharaoh's butler, dream of deliverance. All these dreams are seen as containing important messages that can be divined by dream interpreters like Joseph and Daniel, both of whom seem to derive their interpretations from a divine source.

Yet a counter trend in the Bible suggests a certain anxiety around dreams and their interpretation. Deuteronomy 13:2-4 forbids the people from listening to a dream-diviner who contradicts the words of Torah. The prophet Jeremiah expresses disdain for prophets who get their prophecies from dreams. The concern seems to be that a dreaming prophet may offer their own ideas that go against the sacred text. This worry is reflected in God's warning to Moses in Numbers 12:6, which states that, while future prophets may receive communications by visions or dreams, this is not the case with Moses himself, who communicated directly with God "mouth to mouth."

Another concern to those in power might be that dream prophecy can empower individuals who lack any formal education and live far from the halls of power. After all, a dream interpreter could be just about anyone – "even" a woman or a spiritual practitioner from a very different tradition. And obviously, if that person gains followers, he or she could threaten the social order. So this business of dream interpretation can get political, very fast.

The Talmud is also concerned with the strangeness of dreams. In Tractate Berakhot, the Talmud regards dreaming as one-sixtieth of prophecy; the remainder it calls *devarim b'teilim*, nonsense or idle things. How does one sift the prophetic wheat from the chaff of nonsense? The Talmud recommends consulting a dream interpreter, yet dream interpreters, like Torah interpreters, may have different opinions. The Talmud records the story of one sage who went to 24 dream interpreters, each of whom offered a different — and potentially true — interpretation. Like the Torah itself, dreams can have multiple meanings.

Getting back to Sigmund Freud: he believed that dreams either emerge from experiences you've had that you're still processing, or they are products of your anxiety. He infused both with a lot of sexual fantasies, but the rabbis don't deal with that.

Of course, we dream all the time, but mostly we forget them by morning. I wish I could remember more of my dreams. The one repeated dream I remember most often from childhood is that I might walk into an empty elevator shaft when the elevator door opened on the 5th floor where we lived, with the consequence that I would fall to my death. I never really died in my dream, but the fear of it always woke me up. It's no wonder that I became terrified of elevators as a child, and to this day I prefer the stairs — though probably more for health reasons than fear at this point.

The thing about dreams in Jewish tradition is not just that they occurred so often in Tanakh and that people attributed a lot of meaning to them, often

thinking that they were divinely inspired. It's that the rabbis also warned against them. They didn't want people coming up with dream interpretations that could run against their own teachings and against Halachic dictum. For example, if you dreamed that you could break the Sabbath to embark on an important mission, your dream – or at least your interpretation of that dream – was wrong. Or if you thought from a dream that you had, that you could enjoy a ham sandwich, forget it. Only kosher dreams were given credence back then.

But today? At Fabrangen we always consider Jewish tradition and rabbinical exegesis, but we are not always bound by them. We can spread our wings – and our thoughts and our dreams – much wider.

So I thought that we might share some dreams today – kosher or not, but only share what you are comfortable disclosing. My questions are:

- (1) Did any dream you had ever change your thoughts, or behavior, or even your life?
- (2) Have you ever asked anyone else to interpret your dreams, like the Pharaoh did of Joseph, and what was the outcome?
- (3) Finally, do dreams still play an important part of your life, and how?